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STORY

Seaway plan sparks call for caution

U.S. considers approval of binational study probing possibility of widening canals

Grant LaFleche, The Standard
St Catharines Standard

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"Basically, if you widen the pipes, more water will flow through," said Fabien Lengelle, spokesman for the International Joint Commission. "If you deepen and widen the canals, it could have serious consequences including permanently lowering the levels of some of the lakes, especially Lake Michigan."

The U.S. government is considering the approval of a multimillion-dollar binational study of the Great Lakes to determine the feasibility of introducing cargo ships the same size as those that travel through the Panama Canal into the seaway.

The cost of the three- to five-year study, to be split by federal governments on both sides of the border, is estimated at \$10 million US.

The study, to be conducted by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, would determine whether various locks need to be enlarged and if dredging is required for the supersized ships to pass through the St. Lawrence Seaway and the Great Lakes.

Sylvie Moncion, spokeswoman for the St. Lawrence Seaway Management Corp., said the waterway is in dire need of upgrades.

"It was built in the 1950s and the infrastructure is the same," she said Thursday.

Improvement could mean extending the shipping season or expanding the depth and width of the waterways -- including the Welland Canal -- and the locks, she said. "It is too early to say what the study will recommend."

In the Seaway's annual report, its president says deepening the Welland

Canal to nine metres from 8.2 metres would "substantially improve the efficiency" of the Seaway.

Langelle said the IJC has looked at several options for the Seaway over the years, including expanding the canal, and said there are serious environmental problems.

Larger canals could mean water will pour out faster from Lake Michigan, creating problems for the local economy and fishery.


"If you don't have more water coming in at the source, the result is lower lake levels."

He also said dredging comes with its own set of problems.

"If it is not done properly, you can release a batch of toxin in the sediment into the lakes," he said.

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